undp

update

Published by the Division of Public Affairs
United Nations Development Programme
One UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017

Vol. 8, no. 8, 24 April 1995

Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand & Viet Nam finalize agreement for sustainable development of Lower Mekong Basin

Resolving to strengthen regional co-operation for sustainable development in the Mekong River Basin, the Governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam have signed a landmark agreement to promote the sound use, conservation, better utilization and management of the Basin area. The agreement was approved by the respective governments following two years of intensive negotiations. It was signed by government ministers in Chiang Rai, Thailand, in a ceremony presided over by Thailand's Prime Minister, H.E. Chuan Leekpai. The initiative, which received technical support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is expected to bring important social, economic and environmental benefits to the region. Equally important, it marks the beginning of a new era of political and regional cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Andrea Rankin

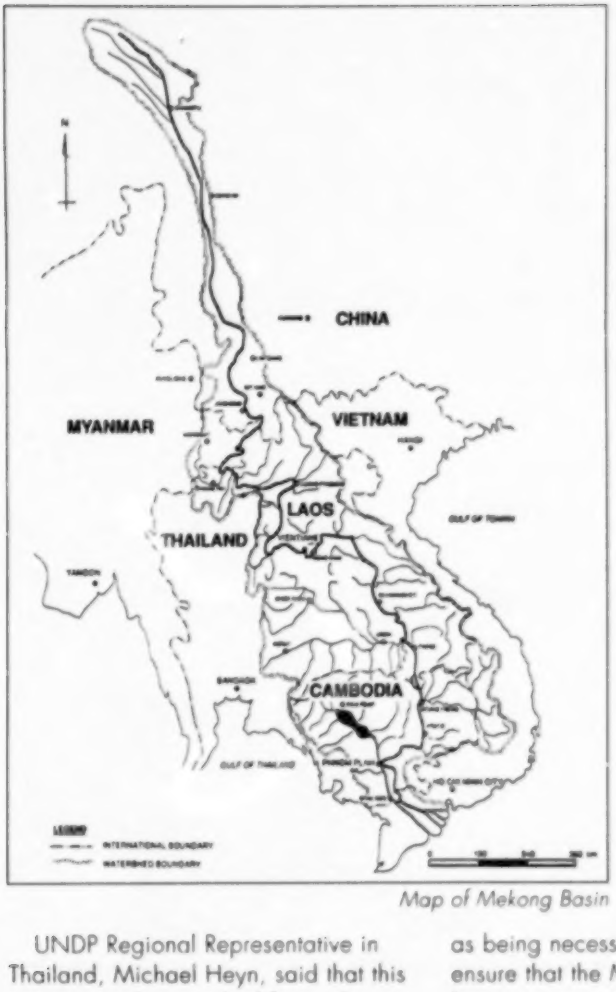
Rice cultivation in the Vientiane Plain, Lao PDR, Lower Mekong Basin.

Under the agreement, the Mekong River Commission will be formed as an autonomous, inter-governmental organization — with representation of the four signatory countries. It will develop policies that promote sustainable development and conservation of the Mekong River Basin's abundant natural resources. Priority areas include irrigation, fisheries, energy and tourism development. The Basin comprises some 600,000 square kilometres of fertile and watershed land and encompasses large parts of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam; the lives and welfare of approximately 52 million people in these countries are in many ways dependent upon it.

In the last four decades, international donors have invested some US$600 million in Mekong River Basin development studies and initiatives. UNDP alone has provided some $55 million, and has played an important catalytic role during the past two years which helped to bring about the landmark agreement that the four countries endorsed. UNDP's Director for Asia and the Pacific and UN Assistant Secretary-General, Dr. Nay Htun, congratulated the governments of the four countries and their peoples for this unique achievement, which, he said, "captures the new political environment in Southeast Asia in an era of new development opportunities and thinking."

In this issue:

Argentina Contributes $1 million for White Helmets initiative · Employment and education levels for Ukrainian women cited in National Human Development Report · UNDP Executive Board approves new country programmes ·



Map of Mekong Basin

UNDP Regional Representative in Thailand, Michael Heyn, said that this initiative is distinguished from others in the past "by the genuine spirit of cooperation among the four countries — which have a long history of political turmoil — and by the strong emphasis being placed on sustainable development." Any future development proposal for the Mekong River Basin, Mr. Heyn said, "must contain significant environmental safeguards and should focus on opportunities for improving the lives of people of this sub-region."

Growing populations and economic pressures threaten the preservation of this vast and wondrous natural resource. A coordinated approach to development in the area is therefore seen as being necessary, indeed vital, to ensure that the Mekong — the 12th longest river in the world and the largest source of fresh water in Southeast Asia — is safeguarded against haphazard development schemes. The new agreement commits the four countries to pursue development plans that benefit regional prosperity while ensuring minimal environmental impact, in a cooperative spirit and on a joint basis.

In the agreement, five clauses focus specifically on the need to take environmental considerations into account in any Mekong Basin development activity, while Article III identifies environmental protection and the maintenance of the ecological balance as a clear priority.

The agreement also accords freedom of navigation throughout the mainstream of the Mekong River, regardless of territorial boundaries, and stipulates that both the People's Republic of China and the Union of Myanmar could become future members.

Along with the Prime Minister of Thailand, H.E. Chuan Leekpai, the signing ceremony was attended by H.E. Ing Kieth, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Works and Transport of Cambodia; H.E. Somsavat Lengsavad, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lao PDR; H.E. Dr. Krasae Chanawongse, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand; and H.E. Nguyen Manh Cam, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam.

Argentina contributes US$1 million to United Nations Volunteers for White Helmets

A new global initiative to create volunteer rapid-response teams was officially launched last month with a $1-million contribution from Argentina, and an agreement signed with the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), an associated fund of UNDP. Known as the White Helmets Initiative, the global programme will involve volunteers in the fields of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development.

"We welcome this contribution from Argentina, which we hope will be the first of many contributions to the White Helmet Initiative," said Brenda Gael McSweeney, UNV Executive Coordinator. This initial contribution will go into a trust fund which will be managed by UNV for the implementation of activities involving the White Helmets.

The new initiative has been called the White Helmets by President Carlos Saul Menem of Argentina, to contrast

with the blue-helmeted UN peacekeeping forces. The White Helmets are to act quickly in bridging the crucial gap between the occurrence of a natural or man-made emergency and the period when rehabilitation begins.

President Menem reasons that many emergencies can be alleviated with trained humanitarian volunteers, the use of whom could in some cases reduce the need to send in so many blue-helmeted military peacekeeping forces.

Co-sponsored by 65 nations last December at the United Nations, the new initiative includes among its supporters all members of the Security Council. The action brought the measure to life with the signing of an agreement, recommended by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali, between Argentina's Commission Against Hunger and Poverty and UNDP's UNV programme, which will oversee the operations of the White Helmets. The UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs is charged with strategic coordination of the White Helmets.

The first White Helmet contingent has already been organized in Argentina, where it is in training for a series of missions that will take place within a few months, as needs arise.

The aim is to expand the White Helmet organization into a multinational, non-governmental body that will recruit its own volunteers on a country-by-country basis. It will also raise its own funds from international, political and humanitarian organizations as well as from the general public of each participating country.

High-level discussions have been held on the possibility of organizing a corps of White Helmets in the United States. Bolivia has also expressed similar interest and is in the process of defining specific White Helmet projects.

Employment and education levels for Ukrainian women cited in national Human Development Report

Women in Ukraine enjoy levels of education among the highest in the world, but paradoxically they appear to be losing ground in just the areas where their educational levels should be conferring equal advantages. They are in danger of becoming marginalized in the industrial labour market, and their representation in government and politics has dropped substantially.

These are some of the findings of the new Ukraine Human Development Report 1995, written by a group of Ukrainian researchers working with the United Nations Office in Kiev. Ukraine is the first country of the former Soviet Union to have produced its own Human Development Report. The publication is designed to contribute to the debate on social development in the country.

Women comprise 54 per cent of the total population in Ukraine. They have achieved exceptionally high educational levels.

But their numbers and education are not reflected in their employment patterns and positions in society, says the report. Under the Soviet system, a large majority of working-age women were employed. Their levels of education were high, and they had access to prolonged maternity leave and child care facilities.

Their share of the labour force exceeded that of men from the early 1970s onwards, remaining stable at about 52 per cent of total employment.

Now, women are facing special difficulties in the "transitional" labour market. The report draws on the findings of a major industrial survey conducted by the Ministry of Statistics, with the assistance of the International Labour Organization. The survey provided evidence for the potential marginalization of women:

- on average, women's wages are 82 per cent of men's wages;
- women are a distinct minority among supervisory and managerial groups; and
- a substantial number of firms expected women's share of employment to fall.

In the past, women constituted about one-third of the Parliament, holding 36 per cent of the seats in the last Soviet Ukrainian assembly. The results of the 1994 parliamentary elections, however, left women with just under four per cent of the seats.

UNDP Executive Board approves new country programmes

UNDP's Executive Board, in its meeting in New York from 3-7 April, approved a number of UNDP and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) country programmes, including eight first-time UNDP country programmes for European and CIS countries. The eight countries are: Belarus, Estonia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The value of the eight country programmes is US$44.3 million. Additionally, the fifth country programmes for Barbados and Turkey were approved, as was the third country programme for the British Virgin Islands.

In informal meetings, the Executive Board also discussed several key matters relating to the framework and structure of UNDP's next programming cycle, set to begin in 1997. Debate on this important topic is set to resume at the Board's next annual session this June.

UNDP and Economic Cooperation Organization establish cooperative relations

UNDP and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) signed a

memorandum of understanding in Islamabad, Pakistan during the Third ECO Summit that was held there in March. The purpose of the agreement is to identify ways that the two organizations can work together to support efforts by ECO member states that seek to promote political and economic co-operation, as well as initiatives that foster sustainable human development. Signing on behalf of UNDP was Mr. Rafeeuddin Ahmed, Associate Administrator, and on behalf of ECO, Mr. Shamshad Ahmed, Secretary-General.

The Economic Cooperation Organization, based in Teheran, is comprised of member countries from the CIS and Asian regions, and currently includes Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The organization is pursuing programmes of cooperation among its members in key economic and social areas such as transport and communications, industry, agriculture, education, science, culture, energy, public works and narcotics control.

Editor: Sid Kane
Tel: (212) 906 5324 · Fax: (212) 906 5364

For change of address in all regions except Europe, contact:
Alison Walton in New York
Tel: (212) 906 5322 · Fax: (212) 906 5364

For change of European addresses, contact:
Marcel Renard in Geneva, Switzerland
Tel: (41 22) 979 9549 · Fax: (41 22) 979 9006

Printed on recycled paper

United Nations
Development Programme
One United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

50 YEARS OF THE UNITED NATIONS 1945-1995